

VZCZCXYZ0002
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0834/01 3171726
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 131726Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6979
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000834

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2019
TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM TS
SUBJECT: TUNISIA: BEN ALI, SWORN IN, HOLDING GRUDGES AND
SETTLING SCORES

REF: A. TUNIS 828
B. TUNIS 813
C. TUNIS 803
D. TUNIS 796
E. TUNIS 791
F. TUNIS 748

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

Summary

11. (C) President Ben Ali was sworn in for a fifth five year term on November 12. In a speech following the ceremony, Ben Ali pledged to redouble efforts to generate employment, economic opportunity, and development, and insisted his government welcomed constructive criticism. His upbeat message was offset, however, by the ominous tone in his speech criticizing Tunisians who "fabricate lies" and "incite foreigners against the country." These remarks, paired with a recent and ongoing crackdown against independent journalists, suggest the Ben Ali government is smarting and angry about the clouds of doubt and skepticism that have hovered over his recent re-election. MFA officials we spoke with recently confirmed the GOT is still unhappy about the lack of a congratulatory message from the USG, and the government reacted furiously to French criticism of the arrest of a Tunisian journalist. The French remarks, in particular, prompted Ben Ali to appeal for solidarity against "foreign interference" to the African Union and the Arab Maghreb Union. Meanwhile, the new parliament was seated on November 10, with most of the leadership from the previous parliament reelected for another term. As reported ref B, a cabinet shuffle is still considered likely, and may be coming soon. End summary.

Focus on Employment and Development

2 (U) In the final act of the re-election cycle (reflets), President Ben Ali was sworn in for a fifth five year term on November 12. In a speech immediately following the ceremony, President Ben Ali outlined an ambitious agenda for economic reform and employment generation. He announced a new "National Employment Fund" that will provide stipends, training, and job placement assistance for university graduates, and a program to expand Tunisia's science and technology sector with the aim of establishing the country as a regional hub for research, development, and precision manufacturing. The President also announced a program that would offer credits and grants to young entrepreneurs, and pledged he would pursue aggressive reforms in Tunisia's tax and customs regimes, moves which would boost investment and accelerate development, he underlined.

Ominous Notes

¶13. (C) While the technocratic, development-focused emphasis of the President's speech was vintage Ben Ali, most noteworthy were the ominous notes he sounded about "Tunisians who fabricate lies" and "incite foreigners against their country." Although the President said his government welcomes differences of opinion and constructive criticism, "A true patriot never takes his disagreement with his country abroad, to distort its image or seek foreign support. Such behavior is ethically, politically, and legally unacceptable.

"It brings the perpetrator nothing but contempt, even from those he tries to incite against his own country," the President warned.

¶14. (C) These remarks, reprising and expanding upon a theme of Ben Ali's address to the nation on the eve of elections (ref E), clearly singled the government's anger at independent Tunisian journalists, and civil society activists, who criticized the government for repression and corruption during the election season. The GOT has not limited itself to rhetoric in responding to critics: As reported in refs C and F, a number of prominent independent journalists and activists have been singled out for assault, arrest, and harassment in the past two months.

¶15. (C) Most recently, in early November, civil society activist and retired diplomat Ahmed Ounais, a close Embassy contact and GOT critic who served as Tunisia's Ambassador to Russia and India in the 1980s, was targeted for character assassination in a tabloid widely believed to be controlled by the Ministry of Interior. The Arabic paper "Kul an-Nas"

described the distinguished and urbane Ounais as a petty criminal and a promiscuous bisexual drunk and drug abuser who spends his time bad-mouthing Tunisia as he carouses at parties hosted by foreign embassies. The article, penned by the tabloid's editor in chief, warned it would release photos and videos of Ounais' "scandals," and could be reporting his arrest "if he doesn't shut his mouth."

Thin Skin to Foreign Critiques

¶16. (SBU) Recent arrests and assaults, including that of independent journalist Taoufik Ben Brik (ref C), who is well-connected in Parisien journalistic circles, prompted rare (separate) public critiques of Tunisia by the Mayor of Paris Bertrand Delanoe (born in Tunisia), who called for "strict respect for human rights in Tunisia," and by the French Foreign Ministry's spokesman on November 6, who said France was concerned by Ben Brik's arrest. Foreign Minister Kouchner himself spoke on French radio on November 10, also expressing concern about Ben Brik's case.

¶17. (SBU) The French remarks provoked angry responses from the Tunisian government: In response to the mayor of Paris' criticism, the mayors of Tunis, Bizerte, and four other Tunisian cities announced their withdrawal from the international association of Francophone Mayors of which Delanoe is chair. An unidentified Tunisian MFA spokesman was quoted widely in Tunisian newspapers saying that Tunisia "firmly rejected foreign interference" and would take no lessons from abroad "particularly on the subject of human rights." Government loyalist Ahmed Innoubli who ran "against" Ben Ali as an "opposition" candidate for President (even as he consistently praised Ben Ali), called on France to apologize for its crimes and its greed during its eighty year colonization of Tunisia.

¶18. (C) Embassy contacts at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, meanwhile, recently made clear to us that the Government of Tunisia is still smarting from the absence of a congratulatory message from President Obama on the occasion of Ben Ali's re-election. Echoing the Foreign Minister's remarks when he convoked the Ambassador on October 28 (ref

D), Mourad Bel Hassan, Deputy Director of the MFA's Americas Desk, told P/E Counselor on November 6 that the GOT could not understand why the U.S. had failed to congratulate Ben Ali on his re-election. "This is being interpreted as a very negative signal," Bel Hassan lamented, adding "I really hope we get these congratulations soon."

¶9. (C) Civil society contacts and activists who gathered at the P/E Counselor's residence on November 10 believed the Ben Ali government felt slapped in the face, both by the French expression of concern and by the absence of elections congratulations from President Obama, "even though" Ben Ali had been "among the first" to congratulate President Obama on his election and, later, on his Nobel Prize. Our contacts felt the GOT's defensive reaction to the French remarks was both predictable and a sign of insecurity, although the Tunisian government found it harder, if not maddeningly impossible, to react to the lack of U.S. congratulations, they believed.

Defensive, Multilaterally

¶10. (SBU) A further, interesting dimension of the Tunisian response was signaled by the President himself during his November 12 speech. Defamation of the country and incitement of foreigners against it, constituted attacks on Tunisia's sovereignty, Ben Ali argued, announcing that he was referring the matter to the chairmen of the African Union and the Arab Maghreb Union so that they "can take the necessary stand and protest those abuses which run counter to the principle of respect for the sovereignty of states and non-interference in their affairs." Tunisian media reported on November 13 that the African Union Commission had "voiced surprise at the recent comments by the French Foreign Ministry."

¶11. (SBU) A November 12 Libyan TV broadcast picked up by OSC (GMP20091112950043), further reported that the Arab Maghreb Union Presidency (which is chaired by Libya), as well as the Community of Sahel and Saharan states, were "preoccupied" by the French remarks. The Libyan report also quoted "sources" saying "Africa no longer needs to learn lessons... particularly from colonial powers whose history is tarnished by human rights violations and genocide in a number of African countries."

New Parliament, Old Faces

¶12. (C) Amidst the drama of the President's re-election, criticism, and public grudge holding, Tunisia's new Chamber of Deputies was seated on November 9. The body's first act was to elect its "new" leadership, which essentially consists of its old leadership. Septugenarian Fouad Mbazza, constitutionally second in the line of succession, was reelected President of the Chamber. Perhaps the most significant change in the new parliament was the seating of Mohammed Sakhr El-Materi, the presidential son-in-law who, at 28, is now the second youngest member of the parliament, and already a media baron and business tycoon, widely seen as a potential successor to Ben Ali (ref B). El-Materi took the seat occupied by Afif Chihboub, brother of another Ben Ali son-in-law (from Ben Ali's first marriage), once a rising star, now seen to have been cast out of the inner circle.

¶13. (C) The average age of the new parliament membership is 55. Women make up 25 percent of the membership, though they hold only 11 percent of the committee chairmanships. The ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) holds 161 of the 214 seats (the total seats in the body has expanded from 189 to 214) and the "opposition" holds 53 seats, although only two of these 53 seats are held by a genuinely independent opposition party - Tajdid. The remaining "opposition" parties are characterized by their loyalty and obedience to

the Ben Ali government.

Cabinet Shuffle

¶14. (C) As discussed ref B, a cabinet shuffle is still anticipated (though not guaranteed). Now that the other "formalities" of the new term have been completed, the shuffle could be imminent.

GRAY